



Medical School Hotline

Humanism, Humility and Health The Opportunity and the Challenge

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A picture, we are told, tells us more than a thousand words. This evening I would like to paint a word picture especially for the sixty-two of you assembled here on the doorstep of your medical career. It will, I hope, explain just why I am the one standing here to welcome you today.

When I was seven years old, I witnessed an event that would change my life. It was an otherwise ordinary evening, and I was in the front room of the house, sitting on the floor, while my mother was in a corner chair feeding my baby brother folded in her arms. He was about two months old. Suddenly the serenity of the moment was shattered as I heard her call out my father's name. All she said was his name. All I heard was pure panic in her voice. My father came rushing into the room and as he approached her chair, I heard her tell him that my brother had stopped breathing. My father then picked up my brother and began to tap him on the back. Nothing happened. There was silence. My brother appeared limp and motionless. My father quickly set him on my mother's lap and rushed to the phone to call the pediatrician. What happened next is vivid in my memory today. He came back into the front room and grabbed my brother by his ankles, holding him upside down, shaking him repeatedly, and forcefully tapping him on the back. But my brother was lifeless. There was no motion and no sound. And his color was drained. He was now blue.

I shall never forget that moment, when looking to my parents for some explanation or wisdom, I saw my fears and my small grasp of the world reflected in their panic. I have never seen them so scared in the realization that we might lose my brother. There was nothing we could do as the minutes ticked by, and with agonizing expectation for the pediatrician's arrival.

Then we heard the motor of a car coming toward the house, the sound of it like a siren signaling the event. As the car approached the front drive and came to a screeching halt, the front car door went flying open, and with his black bag in hand, the pediatrician went running into the house, directly past me and through the door I was holding open. I just stood there, looking at his small Volkswagen with the door still wide open. And in that moment I was afraid. Because what I saw, in the perspective of a seven year old, was something very disturbing. There were things I had been taught that you must do. You must put the towel back on the towel rack. You must close the refrigerator door. You must put the toilet seat down in the bathroom. And you must always close the car door. Now, as I stared at that car door left wide open, I knew things were extremely serious. After all, this was a responsible adult, Dr. Stratton, who left

the door open! Through my eyes as a seven year old, it signaled something almost incomprehensively strange and all too ominous.

I went back into the house to find the pediatrician now on the floor, with his instrument bag open and his stethoscope around his neck. And kneeling over my brother, he immediately began what his training had taught him to do. He was able, as we looked on, to get my brother's heart re-started. And the breath that had stopped slowly began again. With some movement and faint sounds from my brother, I realized this extraordinary individual that rushed to the scene of our most crucial family crisis had just saved my brother's life.

That same physician comforted my parents who were absolutely beside themselves, incapacitated by panic and shock. My mother was still in tears. My father was still standing frozen. And through his actions, and the professionalism that gave him the confidence and competence he needed, he took responsibility for the life of my brother and then responsibility for the emotions surrounding the moment. Later he stayed with my brother in the hospital, throughout the night, until he was certain of his recovery. The events of that day have remained with me ever since. They were events that not only saved a life but also changed mine.

I knew then, as I know now, that there is no higher or more noble calling than that of medicine. Now, noble may seem an old fashioned word but though fashions may change the real essentials don't. So when I say noble I link it with words like self-sacrificing and service, both of which apply very much to those in the medical profession. There is no career that is, by turns, so demanding, so full of responsibility and let's be honest about this, so intrusive and dismantling of your personal life. Yet there is no career that is so magnificently rewarding.

Today marks a beginning for you. Our White Coat Ceremony is a symbolic mark of that beginning. You will be presented with a white coat that I hope you will wear with pride. It marks the start of your educational path, but above all, it should emphasize the humanism that you will have to embrace. The physician that came to my brother's aid that day marked out for me more than the competence that is necessary for a good physician. He also showed, by example, the human empathy that we must all have for our patients. As a visual reminder of that most important, most essential humanism, you have been given a gold lapel pin with a stethoscope in the shape of a heart, surrounded by the words "Humanism in Medicine." Perhaps when you look at that pin, you'll see a reflection of this physician who influenced my life with dramatically competent action and a startling display of humanism from the heart.

Perhaps some of you will be a little nervous today. After all, it's understandable that you would have anxieties and even some uncertainty about what lies ahead. You may be wondering, too, how you will measure up to the tasks and difficulties that you will certainly face. You will wonder about how you will perform under these pressures. And I will only assure you that some anxiety and worry and questions are only healthy and perhaps even necessary. Just as a sportsman needs to test himself so too will you need the adrenalin to face the challenges ahead. Isn't it true that our life is never more precious to us than when it is about to be taken away? It is then that we long for a professional who will smooth the uncertainty and give us help and hope. That, in the future, will be your responsibility, your task and your privilege.

The training that you will undergo is not easy. The hours that you will have to put in will be often long and demanding. However you have already shown by your actions and your place here today that you are open to that challenge. Later this evening you will take the famous oath that has bound so many of us to the profession. Any oath is only made up of words. The Hippocratic oath too is only words but they are exceptional words. They are at their root of what we believe. They hold for us and for the people whose lives you will be helping, the very foundation of your mission in life.

The relationship between a doctor and his patient is the one relationship that can never be violated. Those words bind you to your patient in a way that your learning, no matter how intricate and difficult, never can. To be a good doctor you will have to display that learning under sometimes difficult and often emotional circumstances. A good doctor will understand the suffering of both his or her patient and those who love that patient. A doctor who is true to his or her teaching will never forget that he or she too can always learn from his or her patients. Sometimes doctors seem almost Godlike in their ability to save lives. They should always have the humility to realize that they have been given gifts and asked to use them wisely and well.

So a physician's visit to our house many years ago changed my life. Despite tiredness, despite the emotional demands of being a doctor I have never doubted that I made the right choice. I have never ceased to wonder not only about the leaps and bounds our science and technology has taken, but more than that, I have never ceased to wonder at the marvel that is our human spirit.

Over the years I have never regretted the decision I took. To have this career is a blessing that I have never taken for granted. I was discussing my feelings on this subject with a medical student, after which he said, "Dr. Waters, you need to say those words to the incoming class. You need to tell them just what you told me. They need to know what lies ahead and the value of their life for all the work they will be investing as MS-I's." I had just said to Ravi, "When it's my turn and I'm at the end of my life.... when I'm on my death bed.... there's one thing I will never regret. I will never regret

that my life was not immeasurably full of meaning. I will never wonder whether my life counted. I've had so much opportunity to help others and potentially to even to change the lives of others. It's a genuine privilege to have this career and I wouldn't trade it for anything... not for a second." I count myself so very privileged to be standing here, addressing you and yours tonight.

The fact that your families are with you this evening is very important. Doctors need the love, support and understanding of their families. They represent the value system from which you have developed and matured. Would-be doctors also need the experience and skills of the members of the faculty who are here to welcome you tonight. They represent the value system of this medical school and the new profession you are about to enter.

I hope you will wear your white coats with pride. They are a gift of faith and confidence, presented by individuals who believe in your ability and your commitment to carry on the most noble and respected traditions as a doctor. Some day they will be a symbol of what you offer your patients. You may be working with children in a clinic, with specimens in a laboratory or with soldiers suffering from shock. Whether you are in a clinic, a laboratory, or on a medical mission field that white coat should represent your professionalism combined with your understanding of your patient's needs, both physical and mental. Because, as a physician, you will not only understand disease but also your patient's *dis-ease*.

A pharmaceutical company does not manufacture the most important medicine that you can give. It has no price and requires no training to administer. There are no side effects from this medicine and no way the patient can overdose. Compassion is the most important thing that we can offer. For when the medicines fail, and they all eventually will, it is the only weapon we have to empower our patients and provide them with dignity. Above all, then, your white coat should represent compassion for those who suffer. For then, and only then, will you truly have joined the society of healers.

This is your opportunity. And this is your challenge.

I wish you all the green lights in life as you travel your road to success. And I wish God's blessing on your work.

**Your brain sends
billions
of messages
to your body every second**

Sudden loss
of vision
in one eye

Trouble
understanding
others

Numbness
on one side
of the body

Sudden
loss of
speech

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ALWAYS PAY ATTENTION TO.** These
are signs of stroke, or brain attack.
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